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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 003516

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN ELECTION UPDATE: TWO DAYS OUT

REF: CARACAS 3506

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez and opposition candidate Manuel Rosales officially concluded their campaigns November 30 with press events and final rallies. Chavez claimed without proof that his government recently foiled an assassination attempt against Rosales aimed at discrediting Chavez. European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) Chief Monica Frassoni told PolCouns that the EU EOM is principally concerned about the use of fingerprint (digital scanning) machines and the Chavez campaign's disproportionate access to government media sources. Caracas metropolitan police reportedly raided a Rosales campaign center, but did not seize anything. Widespread rumors of November 30 police round-ups of opposition activists, including from electoral NGO Sumate, proved unfounded. Chevron Latin American President Ali Moshiri told the DCM that he expects Rosales will contest the validity of the electoral process if he is within ten points of Chavez. Former Coordinadora Democratica leader Enrique Mendoza told Deskoff that he did not believe the Rosales campaign was organized to launch organized post-election demonstrations. End Summary.

Rosales Campaign

¶2. (U) The Last Night. Manuel Rosales stayed in Zulia November 30 and does not plan to return to Caracas until he votes in Zulia the morning of December 3. Rosales did press interviews, including with RCTV and CNN Espanol. In Caracas, Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez called on Rosales followers to light off fireworks and bang pots (a "cacerolazo") at 10:00 p.m. in celebration. Emboffs observed the fireworks in the affluent eastern side of town. Polcouns and Deskoff visited a gathering of hundreds of people at a traffic circle near the Embassy. The mood among the upper middle class participants was festive, at one point breaking into to classic opposition chant, "se va" ("He's leaving!").

¶3. (C) Former Coordinadora Democratica leader Enrique Mendoza told Deskoff November 30 he was certain of a Rosales defeat, based on a secret poll by Consultores 21. He predicted that Rosales would reach up to 43 percent, however, which he said would be a victory for the opposition. He appreciated the optimism that Rosales had brought to the opposition, but

criticized harshly the lack of organization in the Rosales campaign. Mendoza, who is the Rosales campaign chair for Miranda State (which includes important parts of Caracas), said he doubted the opposition would respond with violence, noting that they were not prepared to make "guarimba," the city-wide street demonstrations with burning trash and tires.

¶4. (C) He also did not believe that Rosales would be in a position after the election to lead a new opposition movement. The Venezuelan middle class is cruel, he noted from his own experience of losing the presidential referendum, and they would blame Rosales for not catching the BRV at committing fraud or some other excuse. Mendoza also said Rosales had yet to form a national organization, preferring to keep tight control over the campaign via confidants from Maracaibo ("los Maracuchos").

¶5. (C) Comment: Mendoza's negative view of Rosales' campaign and prospects for uniting the opposition after Rosales' likely defeat on December 3 should be seen in the context of Mendoza's unspoken rivalry with Rosales. Having led the Coordinadora to defeat in the recall referendum and ruin afterwards, Mendoza appears uninterested in giving Rosales the credit he deserves for running an excellent campaign. Mendoza's negative take on Rosales' prospects for unifying the opposition post-December 3 must also be seen in this context.

Chavez Campaign

¶6. (SBU) Final Campaign Event. Chavez held a final campaign caravan November 30 in Ciudad Bolivar in the amazonian state of Bolivar. Although no campaigning is permitted 48 hours before voting begins at 6:00 a.m. on December 3, Chavez is

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slated to inaugurate a computer factory December 1 in Paraguaná, Falcon State -- ostensibly in his capacity as president, not candidate.

¶7. (U) Chavez Debates Himself. On the evening of November 30, Chavez gave a rare television roundtable interview from the presidential palace carried on state media and the private channel Venevision. In contrast to the traditional Chavez press conference -- one question followed by a 45-minute answer -- there was back-and-forth between Chavez and four interviewers -- two from the opposition and two from state media. Reporters interrupted the president, when he permitted, and even tried to pin him down on issues.

¶8. (U) Chavez reiterated his threats to shut down any private television station that "enters into coup-mongering" by illegally releasing exit poll results after polls close on Sunday, a move he asserted would boost his popularity to 80 percent. He spent much of the interview harping on the events of the April 2002 coup, calling it Venezuela's "Bay of Pigs" against the "meddling U.S. empire." He restated his accusation that the United States was planning an invasion via "Plan Balboa," but conceded that the invasion might impeded by U.S. engagement in Iraq.

¶9. (U) Chavez also told the media November 30 that his government "foiled" an assassination attempt against Rosales.

He said a group of "radical fascists" had planned to assassinate Rosales and then blame Chavez. Chavez asserted that a rifle with a telescopic lens was found in a vehicle on its way to a Rosales appearance. "Fortunately," Chavez said, his intelligence officers neutralized the assassination plot.

El Universal reports December 1 that a navy captain has been detained for "meeting with conspirators," and Chavez claimed there were a series of open investigations into other possible conspirators.

Observers

¶10. (C) EU EOM Leader Frassoni Reviews Priorities. PolCouns met with EU EOM leader Monica Frassoni and her deputy Tom Boserup on November 29 to outline USG concerns about electoral conditions. Frassoni said the EU is also concerned about voter identification fingerprint (digital scanning) machines for their potential to intimidate voters and slow down the voting process in some areas. The EU EOM is less alarmed about the use of reservists in Plan Republica because of the CNE,s joint broadcast with the military high command the evening of November 28 day in which it was, in her view, made clear that the reservists fell under the military's control. That said, she acknowledged that norms were one thing and their execution another.

¶11. (C) Frassoni added that the Rosales campaign had expressed concern about over 1,500 voting centers where they thought their campaign witnesses might be hindered from entering the center, but had not provided a list for the mission to follow up. Frassoni also mentioned the gross disparity in government campaign time compared to the opposition. She said the mission would probably refer to some parts of last year's EU observation report, but would not draw heavily on it because the elections and CNE board that governed them were different.

CNE/BRV Actions - More Dirty Tricks

¶12. (C) Raids and Rumors of Raids. Late on November 30 Caracas Metropolitan Police reportedly tried to raid a Rosales office on suspicion that the campaign was producing tee-shirts with the word "Fraud" printed on them. No such evidence was discovered, and police backed off once the press showed up. Rumors then abounded of 37 alleged targets of police raids, including the site of the electoral NGO Sumate. Post contacted Sumate official Roberto Abdul, who said they were aware of the rumor but had continued working saying they had nothing to hide. Primero Justicia Secretary General Gerardo Blyde told Poloff he had checked at the prosecutor's office and found no evidence that search warrants had been issued.

¶13. (SBU) Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez asserted to the media November 30 that the recent government decree

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prohibiting public gatherings that "could effect the normal voting process" does not contravene constitutional provisions protected the right of free assembly. He suggested violators of the decree would be sanctioned "administratively," but not face criminal punishment. The Attorney General suggested that law enforcement officials would be respond to anything resembling a "protest that has a pre-determined, common objective."

Election Statistics

¶14. (U) Embassy provides the following statistics related to the December 3 presidential election:

26,632,379,269 Bolivares spent by Chavez campaign (CNE)
(approximately US\$12.4 million)
9,900,960,000 Bolivares spent by Rosales campaign (CNE)
(approximately US\$4.6 million)
15,833,542 Number of Venezuelan voters
125,786 Number of military participants in "Plan Republica"
57,667 Number of Venezuelan Voters Overseas
33,002 Number of voting tables
11,118 Number of voting centers

800 Number of domestic electoral observers
700 Number of prosecutors on duty
225 Number of international observers
214 Tribunals on call to hear electoral violations
86 Number of parties on ballot
24 Number of Venezuelan states (including capital district)
8 Number of states using fingerprinting machines
1 Number of recall referendums against Chavez
0 Number of Venezuelan presidents elected from Zulia
0 Number of times Rosales has lost an election
0 Number of times Chavez has lost a domestic election

Other Developments

¶15. (C) Chevron. Chevron Latin American President Ali Moshiri, who has been in close touch with members of the Rosales campaign, told the DCM November 30 that he believes that the presidential race could be fairly close. He believes that if Chavez wins by only 8-10 percent that the Rosales campaign will challenge the results. Noting that he hoped he was wrong, Moshiri said he nevertheless believes that Zulia because of their "tough, stubborn nature" would be disinclined to accept any government fraud whatsoever. Moshiri also expressed concerns over the fact that numerous Chavista groups are armed. Moshiri said Chevron is supplementing - unbeknownst to the BRV - security arrangements at two of its major facilities, Hamaca and PetroBoscan, with private contractors.

¶16. (SBU) Run on Supermarkets. Venezuelans who can afford to are stocking up on food, drinks, and medicine to have at home in the event that there is any election-related violence. Recent experiences with the 2002-2003 national strike and the run-up to the 2004 recall referendum appear to be fueling a hoarding frenzy at most supermarkets in Caracas.

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